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## WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXAMINE ALL THE WARES IN THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS<sup>1</sup>

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Imagine sitting around a table and talking with friends when someone asks, “Why do some people want to legalize drugs?”

“I don’t know, but they’re wrong,” one of your friends replies.

Another friend adds, “It’s just a bunch of dopers who want to get drugs cheaper.”

“Well,” someone else says, “one of the arguments is that legalizing drugs will eliminate the illegal drug trade, drug criminals, and drug-related crimes, such as robbing people to get money to buy drugs. Legalizing drugs, however, probably means legalizing them only for people over a certain age, so, technically, there still will be an illegal drug market — the market to children, because illegal drug dealers will focus on children instead of adults. As for crimes for drug money, addicts will still need money to get legal drugs at the local minimart, so those crimes are unlikely to diminish. In fact, I think they would increase along with the easy and cheap availability of drugs; after all, drug addicts are not likely to enjoy long-term, gainful employment.”

Which of these three answers is the most interesting and useful? Which answer gives us a better understanding of both sides of the issue? Which one best demonstrates the integration between modern cultural ideas and the moral perspective derived from the Christian faith? The first two answers may be true or at least partially true, but they fail to offer anyone, Christian or non-Christian, pro-legalization or anti-legalization, any philosophical substance with which to work. In other words, they are not likely to influence someone who has an opposite opinion.

I submit that it’s important — no, crucial — for Christians to study and understand the ideas around them. The key to becoming an empowered Christian today is to develop a wholeness of view and a breadth of understanding of the intellectual world; that is, what ideas exist, who holds them, and why. What are the claims for truth, goodness, and human allegiance? What alternatives are proposed for living, governing, and building a future?

With these questions in mind, let’s look at seven reasons why learning about a wide range of ideas and arguments is vitally important.

**1. All Truth Is God’s Truth.** For Christians, truth, along with love (1 Cor. 13; cf. Eph. 4:15), should be the highest goal and the primary value. We look with dismay at those in politics, education, and even science whose ideology or personal agendas take precedence over truth, and we shake our heads. Wherever it can be found, on the lips of the saint or on the lips of the unbeliever (Titus 1:12–13), truth is to be grasped and valued. Someone has said that truth is eschatological and that we won’t have full and complete truth until the end of time. In the meantime, we realize that we are on a journey to develop our understanding by adding to our knowledge and testing new truth claims against the touchstone of the Word. Every idea is worth examining to see what genuine truth it contains. We don’t set the whole field afire just because we see a lot of tares.

**2. All Judgment Is by Comparison.** To say one thing is better than another or to call something good or bad requires that we have a standard of measurement and items to compare to it. To discern a good idea

from a bad one, we need a stock of ideas and arguments and evidence to compare. Is the Christian worldview the most rational one? Only if we know about and understand the materialist/naturalist worldview, the postmodern worldview, the Buddhist or Hindu worldview, for example, will we be able to make a judgment about which one comes closest to the standard of reasonableness.

**3. We Cannot Rebut an Argument We Don't Understand.** If we are to intelligently answer those who attack our faith or offer ideas that conflict with ours, we need to understand truly the reasons and arguments they offer. If our understanding of an opposing view is evident, we will be much more persuasive in our rebuttal of it. Suppose a Muslim says, "But I believe in Jesus already." What will we say if we have no idea what Muslims believe about Jesus?

**4. Ignoring an Argument Strengthens It.** There is a psychological problem with censoring ideas: they take on a power they otherwise would not have. As Robert Cialdini notes in his book, *Influence*, "Almost invariably, our response to banned information is to want to receive that information to a greater extent and to become more favorable toward it than before the ban." In an experiment, college students learned that a speech that opposed coed dorms would be banned. They then became more opposed to the idea of coed dorms. "Thus," says Cialdini, "without ever hearing the speech, the students became more sympathetic to its argument."<sup>2</sup>

If we refuse to listen to an argument against a position we hold, moreover, we may subconsciously be undermining our own position and giving the opposing position more power than it otherwise would have. If we refuse to listen to an argument because it might disprove our position, how solid is our position really?

The danger of holding any belief with the attitude that all further thought about it is closed is that it loses its suppleness, strength, and health. It becomes instead stiff, cold, and frozen, and ultimately easier to conquer.

Those who refuse to discuss objections to their position are either ignorant or dishonest. When I was an undergraduate, an anthropology faculty member told me, "There is no opposition to evolution." Having just read more than 30 books that opposed the theory, I knew at once that he was either ignorant or dishonest — neither of which reflected very favorably on him or his belief.

Those who advocate an idea but are ignorant of any objections to that idea show they are not fully informed. Their faith in that idea, as well as the faith of those they have persuaded to that idea, consequently will be weak because neither person will be prepared to respond to objections. Did the one who taught the idea not think of objections? Worse still, did he or she hide them dishonestly? When we teach about Christianity, for example, we should discuss the classic "problem of evil" and the Christian responses that have been made to it. Having dealt with the nuances of this objection and discovered thoughtful answers to it, Christians will be prepared both to withstand one of the strongest possible attacks on their faith and to share those thoughtful answers with those who object.

**5. Knowledge of Many Different Viewpoints Will Help Us Reach People Where They Are.** We need to think about what motivates non-Christians to believe what they believe and to do what they do, good or bad. Where are they coming from? Are they modernists who believe that science and reason will solve all the problems of humanity, including their own emotional and spiritual needs? Are they postmodernists who believe that science has failed and that reason is merely a tool for controlling the gullible? Are they philosophical eclectics who have borrowed their beliefs from here and there, a little modernism here, a little Eastern religion there, a little postmodern rejection of authority here, a little leftover Judeo-Christian sense of justice there?

To reach people where they are, it is important to recognize the ideas that make up their values and sense of being. If we truly understand what people believe and why they believe it, we will reach them more effectively.

If we ask someone, "Do you believe in God?" and he says "Yes," is that good? If that person is a pantheist, such as a Hindu who believes that God is everything, he might interpret the question as, "Do

you believe in yourself?" He might be thinking, "Of course, I believe in God. We are all God. I believe in me." Knowing something about Hinduism would help us ask the question in a manner that communicates to that person *where he is*, such as, "Do you believe in a transcendent being?"

**6. Ideas Are, in Themselves, Interesting Things.** Stimulating thought, analysis, new ideas, and new arguments may cause us to adjust our position and incorporate new thinking into our view of things. When strange ideas challenge us, they help keep the rust of blind dogmatism off our thoughts.

Ideas are the raw material of other ideas, and we can't always tell what ideas are going to prove useful. Wisdom often travels unusual roads, and it isn't always possible to know where or when we'll meet her. Impractical or plainly awful ideas can still be useful as stepping stones to practical or good ideas. Useful ideas and truths are often contained in the midst of bad ideas and falsehood. Something true, useful, or good can be found in almost anything.

**7. We Might Be Wrong.** Unless we study every side (and sometimes there are more than two) of a controversial issue, how will we really know that our position is the right one? By considering the reasons why people hold different positions, we might learn something, change our mind, or at least modify our position. It may be that we are right after all, only now we will have discovered new reasons and arguments to support our original position.

New ideas that threaten change often create a sense of anxiety. This is true for everyone, but they can also add texture and excitement along the way. The pursuit of truth is a lifelong journey, and we should pursue it with our whole being, taking hold of every thought and idea for the service of God.

-- Robert A. Harris

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay appears on my Web site at <http://www.virtualsalt.com/wares.htm>.
2. Robert Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 215.